

NONFICTION

Modern FBI was born with bloody hands

THE UNION STATION MASSACRE: The Original Sin of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Robert Unger. Andrews McMeel. \$22.95. 256 pp.

By **THEODORE PAPPAS**
Chicago Tribune

When Timothy McVeigh went on trial for his involvement in the Oklahoma City bombing, standing with him in the dock was Uncle Sam. As happened during the O.J. Simpson trial, the FBI's once-ballyhooed crime lab stood accused of wrongly labeling evidence, giving prosecutors the benefit of scientific doubt, and even tailoring lab results to fit the government's theories. Outraged by these revelations, a reporter for National Public Radio said, "It makes us wonder just what the FBI crime lab was doing all those years when no one was watching." Robert Unger says he knows.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has worked for the *Kansas City Star* and the *Chicago Tribune*, Unger tells a riveting tale of a massacre that changed the face of American law enforcement.

Acting as historian and detective, Unger strips away 65 years of legend, lies, perjuries and cover-ups, and reveals what J. Edgar Hoover never wanted revealed: the truth. Forget those stories about the squeaky clean G-men and gangbusters who spoke like Robert Stack and looked like Kevin Costner. "The FBI didn't go bad; it was born bad ... in the blood of Union Station" in Kansas City, Mo., writes Unger. The FBI file on the case "doesn't speak



John Dillinger, left, was among gangsters glamorized as Robin Hoods; that irked J. Edgar Hoover.



of a proud birth. It describes original sin."

A standard account of the massacre is found in Curt Gentry's *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (1991). June 17, 1933, was a busy morning at Union Station. As passengers crowded the front doors, one group leaving the station kept to itself. Handcuffed in the center of the group was Frank Nash, an escaped bank robber who had been captured a few days before. Around him were three police officers and four federal agents.

When the group reached the car waiting to take Nash to Leavenworth prison in Kansas, "they were suddenly ambushed by three men carrying pistols and submachine guns," according to Gentry. By the time the shooting had stopped, "four of the lawmen ... were dead and two others wounded." Also dead was Nash, the man they'd tried to free.

The massacre outraged the nation.

Before the killing, these gangsters of the Heartland — Bonnie and Clyde, Ma Barker and her boys, John Dillinger, et al. — had been glamorized as modern-day Robin Hoods stealing from the state that stole from the people. But the Union Station Massacre changed all that. "This was no Saint Valentine's Day massacre," writes Gentry, "where gangsters killed each other. Blatantly, arrogantly, the gunmen had shot down seven people in broad daylight in a public place."

Hoover quickly capitalized on the tragedy. Within 11 months of the bloodbath, he had successfully lobbied Congress for nine new major crime bills that ballooned the legal jurisdiction of his fledgling agency and provided him with unprecedented power. Hoover then announced on Oct. 10, 1934, the "complete solution" to the massacre. He said that Verne Miller, a bank robber, killer and friend of Nash's, "was identified as the leader of the gun-

men'" and that "the other assassins were Charles Arthur "Pretty Boy" Floyd and the latter's lieutenant, Adam Richetti.... Floyd... was wounded in the skirmish and since that time has, successfully remained under cover."

Now Unger, who since 1983 has combed through every page of the 89-volume FBI file on the massacre, provides as detailed a picture of the shootout as can probably be made. Miller was indeed the leader of the "assassins," but whether Floyd and Richetti were involved we will probably never know. What Unger proves is that the gangsters at Union Station that day were not responsible for the bloodbath: Federal agent Joe Lackey, who was seated in the back seat of the car waiting to take Nash to Leavenworth, panicked when Miller yelled at the lawmen to "Put 'em up! Up! Up!" Lackey shot first and shot wildly, blowing off the back of Nash's head and killing a federal agent and a police officer outside the car.

Unger then takes the reader through Hoover's elaborate cover-up of the truth and other related shenanigans such as illegal wiretaps and break-ins, forced testimonies and the possible manufacturing of evidence in the Bureau's lab.

The FBI's real role in this case is no longer in question, thanks to Unger. The young FBI needed a cause and a crusade and a victory to champion, and the truth about the massacre would not provide what Hoover needed. But no matter, for as Unger concludes, "legend provided it all."